

In brief

MPs call for a debate on human cloning:

The House of Commons Science and Technology Committee is to inquire into the current laws on human cloning. Cloning babies is banned in Britain under the Human Reproductive Cloning Act 2001, with penalties that include a 10 year prison sentence.

Dengue fever kills 189 people in Indonesia:

An outbreak of dengue fever across Indonesia has killed at least 189 people and infected 9500, more than twice the infection rate and mortality of the same time last year.

Prescription fraud reduced by 60% over four years:

Figures collected by the NHS Counter Fraud and Security Management Service show that losses from fraud by patients fell by 60%, from £117m (\$220m; €174m) a year in 1998-9 to £47m a year in 2002-3.

Doctor arrested in morphine deaths investigation:

Mechthild Bach, from the Paracelsus Hospital, near Hanover, was arrested and detained in custody last week. The police have been investigating her for the negligent homicide of 76 patients with morphine (*BMJ* 2003;327:830). Dr Bach, who specialises in caring for patients with terminal illnesses, has not responded to the allegations.

GMC lowers registration fee for refugee doctors:

The General Medical Council has announced it will be reducing its initial registration fee from £390 (\$728m; €580m) to £190 for refugee doctors and will allow them to pay their registration fee in quarterly instalments. The GMC registers approximately 100 refugee doctors a year.

Interferon alpha might be useful in treating SARS:

Interferon alpha, a drug used to treat hepatitis C, has been successfully tested on monkeys infected with severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), say researchers at the Netherlands Erasmus Medical Centre in Rotterdam in a letter published online on 22 February in *Nature Medicine* ahead of print publication (www.nature.com/nm/).

Infertile couples to be given three shots at IVF

Caroline White *London*

Guidance aimed at raising infertility service provision in England and Wales to the standards enjoyed elsewhere in Europe has been published this week.

But concerns have been expressed that the funding and infrastructure needed to implement the guidelines across England and Wales will not be in place for several years.

The guidance was developed by the National Collaborating Centre for Women and Children's Health on behalf of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE), in a bid to rationalise NHS services and boost equity of access to treatment for the one in seven couples with fertility problems.

The publication of the evidence based guideline was delayed by several months, after an unprecedented volume of responses to the first consultation exercise.

Among its key recommendations is the provision of up to

three free cycles of in vitro fertilisation (IVF) for couples who have been unable to conceive for three years because of an identifiable reason—provided that the woman is under 40 years old.

If the guidance is fully implemented, the demand for infertility treatment is estimated to increase by 80% at a projected additional cost to the NHS of £85m (\$159m; €126m) in England and Wales.

In a statement issued by the Department of Health, the health secretary, John Reid, announced that all primary care trusts should offer at least one full cycle of IVF by April 2005, with priority given to childless couples.

"In the longer term I would expect the NHS to make progress towards full implementation of the NICE guidance," he said. He did not stipulate how long full implementation would take,

however, and he did not mention additional funding.

Despite similar guidance issued in Scotland five years ago, wide variation still exists on the number of free IVF cycles offered to couples, because of the lack of central funding. Waiting times stretched to four years in some areas.

One cycle of IVF offers a 25% chance of pregnancy; three cycles offer a 50% chance.

Other key recommendations include:

- Screening for *Chlamydia trachomatis* before testing for blocked fallopian tubes, and hysterosalpingography (outpatient procedure), instead of invasive tests such as laparoscopy, for those not at high risk of tubal problems
- Six cycles of intrauterine insemination for couples with "mild" or unexplained fertility problems—but without ovarian stimulation, to cut the risk of multiple pregnancies
- The transfer of a maximum of two embryos per cycle of IVF. □

Fertility: Assessment and Treatment for People With Fertility Problems can be accessed at www.nice.org.uk

Fewer care cases to be reopened than originally thought

Clare Dyer *legal correspondent, BMJ*

Family court cases to be reopened in England and Wales because of concerns that children were taken into care on disputed medical evidence are expected to be in the "low hundreds" rather than thousands, the children's minister, Margaret Hodge, announced this week in parliament.

The social services departments of local councils are being asked to look at all cases where a final care order was made that depended "exclusively, or almost exclusively, on a serious disagreement between medical experts about the cause of the harm."

Taking into account the child's current circumstances and best interests, and if there were now doubts about the reliability of that evidence, councils should

consider whether to apply for the care orders to be discharged or support an application by the parents, Mrs Hodge said. That would not necessarily be appropriate in each case.

Her guidance leaves it open for councils to decide not to reopen a case even if the evidence was disputed, because the best interests of the child—the paramount consideration in care cases—will militate against a move from a settled, happy home.

Mrs Hodge told MPs that her decision to ask social services departments to trawl through their files came after the Court of Appeal ruling in January in the case of Angela Cannings (24 January, p 183).

Mrs Cannings won an appeal against a conviction for murdering two of her babies. The paediatrician Roy Meadow, who is under investigation by the General Medical Council, gave expert evidence at her trial.

The appeal court said that in future, when reputable medical experts disagreed and there was no other cogent evidence, prosecutions should not be brought.

After the ruling, the government announced a review of 258 criminal cases in the past 10 years in which parents were convicted of killing their children.

Mrs Hodge said the reviews of the family cases would start once the criminal review had finished. □



Margaret Hodge's guidance allows councils not to reopen cases